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COOPERMAN

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STAT

Colleagues of Cal State Fullerton physicist Edward Cooperman Friday called for a full investigation into the "'strong possibility'" that the scientist's ties with Hanoi led to his political assassination.

Vietnam's official news agency has decried Cooperman's Oct. 13 shooting death as a CIA -backed plot, a theory rejected by local investigators and the attorney for Minh Van Lam, a Vietnamese refugee charged with the killing.

Cooperman, 48, maintained strong, well-known ties with Hanoi through his scientific research into Agent Orange and attempts to help rebuild war-torn Vietnam.

Defense attorney Alan May, a former high-ranking member of the Nixon Administration, has dismissed Hanoi's allegation as "'election year propaganda.'"

May has argued that the shooting in Cooperman's office was either an accident or a set-up in which Cooperman "'used'" Minh to stage his own suicide.

Colleagues of Cooperman called the news media together Friday to tell a different story.

Latin American History professor Sheldon Maram said Cooperman's activities were "'viewed as abhorrent to some far-right elements of the Vietnamese community in the United States."

"We know that Professor Cooperman told many of his friends and colleagues, including those present here today, of threats to his life made because of his involvement with Vietnam," Maram said.

He referred to recent testimony before the President's Commission on Organized Crime that organized Vietnamese gangs in the United States have both criminal and political motives.

The Cal State professors urged Orange County's district attorney and grand jury to investigate reputed organized Vietnamese gang activity in the area for any link to the killing.

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And if they are without resources, a federal grand jury be empaneled, Maram said.

Maram and Physics Department chairwoman Dorothy Woolum said Cooperman's fear of a political assassination caused a change in his recent work and personal habits.

He told colleagues about the threats, bought and learned to use firearms, watched self-defense movies, varied his normal routine and trimmed hedges in front of his home that could be used as cover by a potential assailant.

Cooperman hoped he might be protected because he was a native American.

"Nevertheless, he indicated he feared that assassins might try to kill him in such a way that it would appear the killing was not politically motivated," Maram said.

They urged that police not "abandon" the strong possibility of political assassination for May's "implausible theories," which include suggestions that Cooperman might have harbored homosexual leanings toward Minh and other students he befriended.

"(These theories) have tended to blame the victim for the crime and cast aspersions on the character of a person whose voice has been stilled by a bullet," Maram said.